

NOTE:

This lesson focuses on the historical background to the story and a synopsis of all the chapters. Summary of chapters gives the story line i.e. main issues in each chapter. Do not disregard the book and depend on this summary, they could be some omissions. Furthermore you are expected to interrogate the text and draw your own personal conclusions about what the writer has presented. Lastly apply the different literary techniques or look at how Bessie Head has utilized the in this moving and free flowing story. A story every learner is bound to ENJOY!

BESSIE HEAD: THE AUTHOR

She is a South African writer of great stature who was born in KZN's Pietermaritzburg in the late 30s. She was a *coloured, illegitimate and unwanted child* who confronted emotional torture and bruises and also psychological violence right from the beginning of her life. Her mother was White, and came from an affluent and luxurious background, who according to the laws of the time contravened the norm by involving herself in a romantic relationship with a black poor man. Due to that, she became an outcast in the family, her pregnancy (that produced Bessie Head) became a disgrace to family. In the then Apartheid South Africa union between Whites and Blacks was a social taboo, it was detestable according to the laws of the time.

Her writings uncovered the trauma and torture of being an unwanted child, a child lacking identity and belongingness. She talks about the search for a **“self” and freedom**, she wants freedom from all the oppressive and hostile social structures that marginalized and disadvantaged the poor Blacks in South Africa. In her works she presents issues such social marginalization, social exclusion and social disadvantage. She challenges social systems that perpetuated processes such social stratification and differentiation. The structures that she challenges are products of Apartheid policies, policies that entrenched hostility amongst different racial and ethnic groups in South Africa. The policies divided the population of the country according to race and language.

In **“When Rain Clouds Gather”** she highlights her different life experiences that led to her move to another country, Botswana. The decision to move across the South African borders is a result of the search for the **‘self’, identity and personal freedom**. Her move away from South Africa is symbolic in the sense that it also refers to the move away from autocracy to democracy and human freedom. The different characters in the story come from different social backgrounds, a true reflection of South Africa's rainbow nation / diversified / multiracial / multicultural / multilingual nation. Their different experiences represent the different social settings and associated events as they were manufactured by Apartheid. People such as Makhaya left the country for Golema Mmidi because of involvement in the so-called terrorist activities. Makhaya is searching for life that is not fragmented and also calmness. Makhaya does not enjoy life and all associated privileges in South Africa, consequently he escapes to Botswana. He foresees freedom and peace of mind in that country. SA is supposed to be Makhaya's home (ikhaya), but it is homely at all! He wonders about because being ill-treated and disadvantaged in his place of birth, place that is supposed to be good to him. The literary device that Bessie has used here is known as naming, Makhaya has no proper **ikhaya** (he homeless yet is in a country of birth).

“When Rain Clouds Gather” was written at a particular time in South African history, although fictitious it remains a portrayal of the writer's personal experiences. When clouds gather there is an illusion of freedom and better. The gathering of clouds allows one to see beyond the present circumstances and associated hostilities. It marks hope and an end of current happenings and experiences.

CHAPTER 1

Makhaya, a young man stands fearfully in a hut just beside the border fence, the boarder between South Africa and Botswana. He wants to illegally immigrate to Botswana in search for better political life. He is fears being caught by the police whose **‘wailing siren’** keeps him on his toes. Ikhaya come from IsiZulu, and it means home. This is ironical because Makhaya does not have home in the true sense of the word home. So, the name Makhaya is wrong and irrelevant to this young man. He never liked tribalism and all associated illnesses. It is such social illnesses that

compelled and propelled him to move away /escape South Africa in favour of Botswana. He was a very brave man who was very much prepared to articulate and express his views and opinions about the country. His main problem with South Africa is that he has never found any **‘contentment and peace’**. For instance, he detested the use of derogatory terms (insults) such as **‘boy’, ‘dog’ and ‘kaffir’** when referring to the Blacks. To him this marked the dehumanization and objectification of the Blacks. He cleverly escaped, walked a very long distance and ultimately got a lift from a truck driver, whom he told that he belonged to the Ndebele tribal group so as he thought that they dominated the area. When he came to the police that he was an illegal alien, he strikingly found his picture on the front page. He had been declared a dangerous saboteur, of which he protested with success. Eventually he squats in an old man's (Dinorego) residence since his village required educated man. The name of the village is Golema Mmidi.

CHAPTER 2

Golema Mmidi village was one of the migratory villages prior the arrival of a White commercial farmer by the name of Gilbert Balfour. The native subsistence farmers stayed on the land as long as it was productive, once it has lost its fertility people migrated to other productive lands. Makhaya clicked with and cling on Dinorego's back. He was an old man very much talented in craftwork such as making blankets from wild animals' skin. Dinorego narrated many stories to Makhaya about life before and after the arrival of the Whites in the village. Dinorego had a daughter by the name of Maria, for whom he wanted a husband. Makhaya taught her English. Makhaya met Gilbert, who because of finding it difficult to pronounce his name properly settled for “Mack”, in their discussion it emerged that Makhaya a wife, had worked as a journalist, and as a member of underground sabotage movement.

CHAPTER 3

Gilbert learns more about Golema Mmidi village from Dinorego, he narrates all stories about the place prior his arrival-this includes talking about plant and animal species that were in the area, the type of soil, etc. Gilbert's fencing of the 250 acres he owned aroused dissatisfaction amongst the village leadership, particularly Chief Matenge (he had a politician friend by the name of Joas Tsepe) who believed in communal (common) land ownership. Gilbert, being a commercial farmer went private land control, something strange in the area. He enslaved and exploited the Blacks. There were gross and vast dissimilarities between Gilbert's approach to farming and the villagers'. The village has too many chiefs. Chief Matenge wanted to preserve his authority and hegemony, the presence of Gilbert and pro-reforms brother threatened him greatly. He had an inferiority complex problem, such that he plotted the assassination of his brother. The chief like Gilbert exploited the poor villagers. The village became politicized, with the Liberation Party and the Pan-African movement contesting votes from the villagers. Matenge is in conflict with Makhaya whom he associate with Gilbert.

CHAPTER 4

Chief Sekoto, a well-mannered man, a very diligent chief who attended to all villagers' cases with carefulness and dedication, is always having cases to address and solve. Makhaya's case of living with Gilbert (keeping refugees in his compound), Mma-Baloi's case of practicing witchcraft, and many others were treated meticulously. Amongst his admirers is George Appleby-Smith, a shrewd judge who stood for justice, peace and transformation in the land.

CHAPTER 5

Botswana people depended very much on agriculture. Too much of politics distract the Botswana people whose priority was subsistence farming. The population is divided according to class and political affiliation. The language politicians spoke did not communicate clear and understandable messages to the people. Chief Matenge is embarking on a self-upliftment project, he is utilizing props to improve his image, character and status in the community. Makhaya suffers loneliness as a refugee, particularly because Matenge constantly made serious allegations such as that the refugees murder people at night. He is insulted, but all in vain as he stood firm and unvexed. He quarrels with Joas Tsepe and his surrogates. Dinorego introduces Mma-Millipede to Makhaya, she was a poor and a kind Christian who was chased even by chief's sons (such as Ramagodi, a drunkard and an arrogant womanizer), something very much uncommon. Although she never had great interest to Ramagodi she married him and later got dumped in favour of a string of other women, this included marrying his late brother's wife. The villagers disapproved of his deeds in vain. Chaos erupted, Ramagodi's son is exiled away after having tried to kill him, Mma-Millipede is unhappy, ultimately she stays with Dinorego at Golema Mmidi. Makhaya seeks residence permit entangles between two opposing forces, a group led by Matenge that never liked him and Apple-Smith who

adored him. Luckily for him Matenge is attacked by sickness, and Joas is sent on a six-month mission duty.

CHAPTER 6

Romantic advances on the cards. Paulina and Maria require Makhaya in their lives, with Paulina the most serious candidate. She is clearly in love with Makhaya, who seem to happy to be having break from politics. Maria is eyeing Gilbert now although his culture seems to be strange to her, for example he kept pets at home.

CHAPTER 7

Gilbert is getting married to Maria, he appears not very much overwhelmed by the occasion. Despite that that was a big day, he still wanted to address issues pertaining to the cultivation for self-sufficiency. Paulina's still madly in love with Makhaya who seem to be relaxed.

CHAPTER 8

Makhaya and Paulina are married after having been set up via getting them to work together. Makhaya is happy and humorous to all villagers, but his wife seems to be noticing something deep down his heart. This is because of insecurity.

CHAPTER 9

Makhaya is amazed by his close relationship with Gilbert, a White person-something he never saw in South Africa. They live in peace and unity. His life is free of hatred and fear for another human being. There is equality, as a Black man he's nobody's slave. He's regained a sense of manhood and personal dignity. The community values cattle ownership, sometimes at the expense of education, this worries Makhaya.

CHAPTER 10

Agricultural changes, from a hand to-mouth life style to a profit making farming method. Farming as an economic activity blossoms in the village. Commercial farming seems to be overtaking communal / subsistence farming. Isaac's fatal illness and death brought Makhaya and Paulina together, although not married. Chief Matenge's reign has vanished, the place is too advanced for a dictator.

CHAPTER 11

Adverse climatic changes destroy life. Droughts kill people and their crops. Makhaya finds himself home away from home. He fully identifies with Batswana people. He desires to be a millionaire via feeding the Batswana people. He sees himself as having a responsibility of determining his destiny. He believes that Blacks can take control of their lives.

CHAPTER 12

Matenge's life and reign come to an end. He takes his own life, (commits suicide) a sign of being mentally weak and challenged. This marks complete end of autocracy or dictatorship. He is given a cold shoulder by all villagers, including Joas Tsepe. Gilbert's co-operatives have unified the villagers in farming and economic production. Paulina is a leader of women in the village. Makhaya is not prepared to escape from the Batswana people, that would be an escape from freedom and all associated responsibilities. MAKHAYA has a home now, the home is Botswana's Golema Mmidi village. In IsiZulu MaKHAYa has **ikhaya** 'found' himself, he belongs somewhere and is happy to be treated as a human being. He has dignity, peace and freedom. He can now sit, relax and enjoy life like everyone else. He has identified with the villagers, his self-concept and image are changing for the better. He has a sense of identity and belongingness, has a positive outlook on life. From hostile SA village to a warm Botswana one. Makhaya belongs here now!

LET'S WRAP!!

- Use this summary as a broad and superficial overview of the story.
- Interrogate and engage the text further. Read between and along the line to unpack the text and draw sound (justifiable) conclusions about the characters and associated events.
- This summary should be used as secondary support material.
- When 'the rain clouds gather', there will always be an illusion of freedom and batter life ahead. There is light of at the end of the tunnel, change and social transformation are possible. Today South Africa is free and/or better because of people who risked their lives and fought against the social ills with great determination, patience, vigour, etc. ultimately cloud hanging over South Africa got cleared. Literature (novels and other forms of writing) was also used quite immensely to raise consciousness, to mobilize, to educate, to influence, etc South Africans. Literature was (is) a tool for advancing social transformation agenda. **“When the rain Clouds Gather”** is such a genre, it is a deeply political and polemical piece of writing. To enjoy it you must know where you come from.

UNTILL NEXT TIME,
ENJOY!!

